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AUTHOR Weitman, Catheryn J.; Humphries, Janie H.
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ABSTRACT

Data were collected from elementary school principals and kindergarten teachers in Texas and Louisiana in an effort to identify qualities that are thought to be important for kindergarten teachers. A questionnaire listing 462 qualities of early childhood teachers was compiled from literature reviews. Subjects were asked to check a maximum of 50 qualities. Of the 142 principals and kindergarten teachers in 6 northern Louisiana parishes to whom questionnaires were mailed, 39 percent returned the forms. In a similar mailing of 266 questionnaires to 18 rural and urban school districts in Texas, 74 percent of principals and 67 percent of kindergarten teachers responded. Findings indicated that principals and kindergarten teachers lacked agreeement on qualities deemed important for teachers of young children. This was true even among teachers and principals in the same school. An exception was found among principals in Louisiana, who exhibited agreement on seven items dealing with administrative concerns, effective teaching skills, and innate qualities. Six of the original 462 items were ranked important by three of the four respondent groups. Only two items were on both the Louisiana principals' list of seven and the majority's list of six qualities; these were: accepts children equally, and aids with positive self-image. (RH)

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QUALITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: REFLECTIONS FROM TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Catheryn J. Weitman, Ph.D., and Janie H. Humphries, Ed.D.

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Background Information

This is a summary report of a presentation made at the Annual Southern Association for Children Under Six (SACUS) Conference in Richmond, VA, April 1989. This presentation stems from longitudinal research based on qualities of early childhood teachers. The original study was conducted in 1986 with Texas administrators, parents, and teachers. Follow-up studies were completed with teachers and administrators in Louisiana in 1988 and in Texas in 1989. In the later studies, which were the focus of this presentation, information was gathered from elementary school principals and their kindergarten teachers for the sole purpose of identifying common qualities thought to be important for kindergarten teachers. This was necessary so that comparisons between principals' views on teacher qualities for kindergarten teachers could be correlated with views held by kindergarten teachers employed in the same schools. The rationale for conducting the study was the revitalization of and emerging emphasis on early childhood education.

Procedures For Data Gathering

For these studies, a questionnaire listing 462 qualities of early childhood teachers* was complied from literature reviews. Respondents were asked to check a maximum of 50 qualities which were considered most important** for kindergarten teachers.

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Populations

Louisiana 1988 Study. Principals and kindergarten teachers in six north Louisiana parishes were mailed a questionnaire. Of the 142 sent, 39 percent were returned. This study focused on a regional response, rather than attempting to obtain statewide data.

Texas 1989 Study. In trying to obtain a diverse population, urban and rural schools districts were sampled throughout Texas during 1989. Two hundred sixty-six questionnaires were mailed to 18 school districts. Seventy-four per cent of the principals and 67 per cent of the kindergarten teachers responded.

Results

Louisiana Study. Between teachers and principals, consensus on any one quality was not found. However, principals among themselves reached consensus, on seven items which they considered important for kindergarten teachers. (See Table 1.) These seven items can be divided into three categories: administrative concerns, effective teaching skills, and innate qualities. In the first category, "accepts a fair share of the work load" and "adjusts daily schedule to meet children's needs and interests" are managerial issues with which principals must be concerned. With the second item, this characteristic is perceived from the perspective of the teacher as meeting school wide scheduling that is determined by children's needs, ages, and interests. Characteristics which are aligned with effective teaching research (see Wittrock, M. C. (ED.) (1986). Handbook of research on teaching. New York:

MacMillan.) are items 2 and 6: "accepts and uses individual characteristics of children" and "aids with positive self-image." Innate qualities are "accepts children equally, accepts children's feelings, and enjoys teaching for variety, challenge, and ability to help children grow."

Interestingly, enough kindergarten teachers ranked only three of these seven items as important. The three attributes were: "adjusts daily schedule to meet children's needs and interests, aids with positive self image," and accepts children equally." These three received a ranking of 66, 64, and 61 percent. The item that Louisiana teachers ranked highest was perceived perhaps in a different light than their administrative counterparts. In the teachers' case, this quality may be linked to individual teacher's scheduling preferences based on the needs and interests of assigned children.

Hence, more commonality exists among Louisiana principals than teachers as to the qualities deemed important for kindergarten teachers. Yet, both teachers and principals agreed that three items were significant, one of which had greater importance depending upon the perspective.

Insert Table 1.

Texas Study. The immediate findings revealed that consensus on qualities for kindergarten teachers was not met between the respondents. However, both groups identified items that were important, although the degree of importance varied. Table 2 compares Texas teachers' and principals' responses.

Insert Table 2

As noted from the table, the percentages of similar items identified as important qualities were given for each group. For example, 64 per cent of the teachers selected the quality "creates an atmosphere that provides many opportunities for children to explore and experiment" as the most important attributes to possess; as compared to only 48 percent of the elementary principals selected this quality. The greatest variance between the teachers' and principals' responses dealt with the quality "assessing development, learning, behavior, and programs and modifies teaching strategies according." The difference between the two groups was 28 percent. Thirty-six percent of the teachers selected this quality; whereas this item was selected by 64 percent of principals. Hence, this quality was deemed by principals as being more important for kindergarten teachers to posses than by kindergarten teachers themselves.

Similarities in the importance of qualities were visible in two instances (see Table 2). With the trait "aims for children's success," both groups responded in like fashion. Teachers and principals varied by one percentage point; 51 and 52 percent respectively. In the other case, while close, some variation appeared between the responding groups with the quality "expresses genuine warmth and concern." Teachers ranked this at 51 percent,

while principals ranked it at 56 percent. Not only was there closeness in agreement between both parties on these two qualities, but both items were found to be ranked very close together. This closeness must be underscored as being extremely noteworthy. The rationale for the importance of this closeness in the agreement on these two qualities reemphasizes the relationship between nurturing and children's success in school: on enhances the other.

Comparison Between Louisiana Study and Texas Study. A synopsis of the results indicates two interesting observations. First, three out of the four responding groups agreed that six characteristics were important for kindergarten teachers. These six items were: 1) "accepts children equally", 2) "aids with positive self image," 3) "aims for children's success," 4) "creates an atmosphere that provides many opportunities for children to explore and experiment using sense and experiences," 5) "enjoys young children," and 6) "express genuine warmth and concern for children." (See Table 3).

Insert Table 3

Of these six qualities, three seem more likely to be considered innate while the other three are ones that can be taught. The innate attributes are items 1, 5, and 6; the teachable ones are 2, 3, and 4 as noted in Table 3.

The second observation noted with the four respondent groups is the

differences between the ranges of rankings of the individual qualities. The span between how teachers as a group in both states ranked the qualities was smaller than how the principals, as a group, ranked their selected items. Apparently, kindergarten teachers are in more agreement about what characteristics they should possess than their administrators. But as logical and expected as this result was, the reader must remember that teachers as a group could not identify even <u>one</u> characteristic for which all could concur as being important for kindergarten teachers.

Additionally, a noteworthy comparison must be drawn to the fact that two items were selected frequently throughout this research. These two items were ones that all the Louisiana principals noted as well as an item that was selected by three of the four respondent groups. These two qualities were: "accepts children equally" and "aids with positive self-image." The frequency with which these two items were selected may be due to the fact that these attributes are ones that are quite frequently addressed in literature as common themes especially in working with young children (Seefeldt, C. (Ed.) (1987). The early childhood curriculum: A review of current research. New York: Teachers College Press.).

Conclusions

In summary, broad conclusions can be derived from the data. These are:

1. Principals and kindergarten teachers lack identification of important qualities that teachers of young children ought to possess. This was even true among teachers and principals in the <u>same</u> schools.

2. The only consensus reached among the sample populations was with Louisiana principals. Agreement was at 100 percent on seven items. (See Table 1).

3. Six items, out of the original listing of 462, were ranked important by three out of the four respondent groups.

4. Of the characteristics that Louisiana principals agreed upon and of the six qualities that were deemed important by most of the participants as a whole, two items were on both lists.

Implications for Further Research

The feedback obtained through these two studies should provide early childhood researchers with directions for further investigations. The six qualities which were common among the respondents should be examined as to how they: 1) impact teachers on the job; 2) provide insight into the effect on hiring, teacher evaluation, and student achievement; and 3) create a linkage between administrators and teachers in regard to how important these six qualities are for future kindergarten teachers.

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* The national definition of early childhood teachers are those that teach children below third grade. However, most practitioners limit the term to mean teachers of younger children, including those that teach kindergarten and younger children.

** Importance was defined when 50 per cent or more of all respondent groups agreed that a quality was relevant for kindergarten teachers.

References

Seefeldt, C. (Ed.)(1987). The early childhood curriculum: A review of current research. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wittrock, M. C. (ED.) (1986). Handbook of research on teaching. New York: MacMillan.

TABLE 1

Comparisons of Qualities Between Principals and Teachers in Like Schools in Louisiana 1988

Qualities by Principals to Teachers	P	T
Accepts a fair share of the work load	100%	*
Accepts and uses individual characteristics of children	100	*
Accepts children equally	100	61
Accepts children's feelings	100	*
Adjusts daily schedules to meet children's needs and interests	100	66 +
Aids with positive self-image	100	64
Enjoys teaching for variety, challenge, and ability to help children grow	100	*

* Ranking below 48%

\+ Since LA teachers did not reach consensus, this was the quality with highest percent agreement

TABLE 2

Comparisons of Qualities Between Principals and Teachers in Like Schools in Texas 1989

Qualities by Teachers to Principals	P	T
Creates an atmosphere that provides many opportunities for children to explore and experiment	48%	64%
Aids with positive self-image	36	58
Has a teacher attitude that is positive	48	58
Allows sounds of laughter, excitement, and pleasant conversation to be heard	64	57
Has a teacher attitude that is motivating	44	56
Has a teacher attitude that is willing to learn from children	44	56
Communicates in positive manner	40	52
Aims for children's success	52	51
Expresses genuine warmth and concern for children	56	51

Qualities by Principals to Teachers	P	T
Assesses development, learning, behavior, and programs and modifies teaching strategies accordingly	64	36
Creates a supportive environment for developing inner-discipline	56	39
Enjoys young children	56	40
Accepts children equally	52	36

TABLE 3.

Comparisons of Qualities Between
Louisiana and Texas
Teachers

Quality	Teachers LA	Teachers TX	Principals LA	Principals TX
Accepts children equally	51	37	100	52
Adjusts daily schedule to meet children's needs and interests	66%	41	100	40
Aids with positive self-image	64	54	100	36
Aims for Children's success	*	51	85	52
Balances child-directed and teacher-directed activities	50	30		
Creates an atmosphere that provides many opportunities for children to explore and experiment using senses and experiences	52	64	85	*
Develops responsibility in children	55	46	92	*
Enjoys young children	57	40	100	56
Expresses genuine warmth and concern for children	52	51	*	56
Has a teacher attitiude that is positive, willing to learn and motivating	50	***		
Has common sense	50	23		
Has the ability to manage a classroom	52	42	85	*

\+ Mandated by Louisiana law

*** Texas teachers separated these qualities into three distinct qualities, whereby:
Has a teacher attitude that is positive
Has a teacher attitude that is willing to learn from children
Has a teacher attitude that is motivating

* Below 50%

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Louisiana Tech University